

A man with a goatee, wearing a brown cowboy hat, a black leather jacket over a light blue button-down shirt, and blue jeans, stands in a snowy field. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, there is a white horse pulling a small wooden cart. To the left, a Christmas tree is decorated with colorful lights. The sky is blue with strings of colorful Christmas lights hanging across it. The overall scene is festive and romantic.

TANYA HANSON

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A HEARTS CROSSING RANCH
HOLIDAY ROMANCE

*Christmas
Lights*

Christmas Lights

Tanya Hanson

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Christmas Lights

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Dedication

To my granddaughter Reagan Christine... You are only three months old right now, so I pray you will always believe in Jesus, Santa Claus, and happily-ever-afters.

What People are Saying

HEARTS CROSSING RANCH: 4 1/2-Book review, Long and Short Reviews. "The first thing I noticed about this story was the beautiful descriptions of the Colorado countryside...Ms. Hanson's writing is delightful. It brought me right into the story from sentence one. She's quite a storyteller as she weaves her tale and draws you into it. From the hurt and the heartbreak of these two main characters to the joy and boundless love which comes from God's grace by story's end. There was a beauty to the story of these characters as the plot unfolds and these two fall in love in a believable and sweet way."

SANCTUARY, 5-Cup Review and CTRR Award, Recommended Read, Coffee Time Romance. "Sanctuary was a spellbinding story. It captivated this reader completely. Just when I thought it could not get any better, Ms. Hanson throws in a curve with the ex-wife. This remarkable read was extremely hard to put down...This extraordinary read is one that I truly recommend to everyone. Tanya Hanson gives the reader promise in her characters."

RIGHT TO BRAGG: 5-Heart Review: The Romance Studio. "As usual, Tanya Hanson has surpassed expectations with her latest glimpse into the Martin family at Hearts Crossing Ranch...I highly, highly recommend this book..."

1

Oh...the holidays. Like fallen stars, the ranch house's million Christmas lights sparkled against the night. Lori swallowed hard as she turned into the long drive leading into Hearts Crossing. Peace, plenty. Comfort and joy. And she felt none of it.

Her heart had pounded the whole way from town and all but climbed up her throat now. Could she and Scott have found happiness at this beautiful ranch? She'd ever know. Kyle had ruined everything.

"Oh, Auntie, it looks like all the stars at once." Lori's little niece reached for her.

"Yes, it's beautiful." She meant it, but the dark memories clouded her vision. With a harsh breath, she braked slowly through the slushy road. Yes, she and Scott Martin had been quite the item that summer five years ago. Before it all happened. Before Kyle.

Miriam clapped her hands, brought Lori into the moment. "Oh, I love Christmas parties."

Lori didn't. But representing her family tonight was something she couldn't avoid. The Hearts Crossing Ranch Christmas party was the social event of the holiday season.

"Well, it isn't time for presents tonight," she said finally. "But the Martins will have plenty of food and fun."

The Martins. For a time or two that summer, Lori had thought she'd become one of them. That's how her twenty-one year old mind had worked back then. Until Kyle. Kyle...her breath hitched. *Scott.* He had forgiven her and was a happily married dad now. But still...

Driving beneath the horizontal wooden beam hung with the ranch's brand calmed Lori a little. Outlined in white lights and wrought in iron, two intersecting hearts with a cross uniting them conveyed what the Martin clan was all about: love and faith. If she'd only trusted God after that horrible night in Boulder.

Tears heated her eyelids one more time.

"The lights look like a jillion fireflies!" Miriam's excitement bounded around the car, and Lori halted her thoughts of the past. Wasn't Christmas the time of good news? Why was the healing taking so long? Nerves skittered up and down her spine in rhythm with the twinkling lights. Each fence post, each angle of every outbuilding, and each window frame of the big friendly house itself was outlined in sparkling white lights.

Fireflies and fallen stars. Tears slid down her nose and she wiped them away before Miriam saw. Visiting Hearts Crossing Ranch always started her imagination. Such a place of warmth and peace. Thoughts of Scott entered her head again. How different things might have been, had she given him her trust as well. Instead, her life had exploded into such a prickly thing.

She parked in the west pasture along with a hundred other vehicles. A one-horse open sleigh approached from the house, and Miriam shrieked in rapture. Its bells tinkled on the wind. Battery-powered lanterns glowed from each side of the sleigh. Lori

twisted a smile. Her heart wasn't so dead it couldn't lighten at the sight.

Then she caught sight of the driver. Even bundled in a shearling jacket and wide woolen scarf, the cowboy was so magnificent Lori might have gone breathless in her other life. But not now. Not her.

Not here. But her blood pounded anyway.

He jumped from the sleigh and opened her car door, touched his brim. "How do, ma'am." His voice warmed the air. "I'll get you right up to the front door, and back here again when you leave."

"Pretty perfect." She grabbed the hostess gift.

"We aim to please."

That drawl again set her heart racing whether it wanted to or not.

"Let me help you ladies aboard," he said and led them to the sleigh.

Miriam started up "Jingle Bells" off key, and Lori grudging a smile. "This is amazing. I'm not surprised, though, the Martins bringing a Christmas carol to life. They always do things right."

"Chauffeuring this sleigh gives me something to do. Not a party man myself." In the bright glare, he tossed a sheepish grin.

She smiled back, a real one this time. Heart thrummed again. A man after her own heart. Surprised, she realized the silly cliché hadn't unnerved her. For once.

Still singing, Miriam climbed into the sleigh herself, but the cowboy gave Lori his hand. His touch jolted her, even through the gloves they both wore. How could that be, when she had no interest in romance?

Besides, somebody this glorious had to belong to

somebody already. Shocked...a funny jealousy niggled deep down.

"Step up," he ordered the spectacular black draft horse, and they set off for the big house across tracks in the snow that the sleigh had made before.

That meant tons of visitors already.

That meant plenty of people to hide behind.

That meant Lori could calm herself.

She settled against the red upholstery. They had more than half mile to go. Although the sleigh easily sat eight or ten people, now it was just the three of them, Miriam in between. The lanterns brightened swags of pine garlands along the vehicle's sides. Big red bows and bells, too.

Perfection. Was she supposed to converse with her driver? Seemed rude not to. He was whistling along with Miriam.

"Thank you for the ride."

"My pleasure. You got a cute little girl here." He doffed his Stetson.

Miriam punched his shoulder lightly. "I'm not so little. I'm six years old. And I'm not hers. She's my auntie."

Was that his way of wanting to learn if Lori was attached? She wasn't, but she wasn't interested either. Not that she didn't appreciate the fine sight of his hair glinting gold from the lights.

"She has nobody," Miriam chirped.

True, and by Lori's own accord, but the words hurt anyway.

"Do you have a little girl?" Miriam asked.

"Nope. No little girl, no big girl. Bachelor uncle to some nieces and nephews, though."

"Can I see them?" Miriam asked.

The cowboy laughed. "You just wait a minute," he said.

Wind brushed through his hair like a woman's fingers might before he returned his hat to his head. For a crazy second, Lori ached for those fingers to be hers. What was happening to her? With an eye roll, she willed herself to sound normal. "As she told you, this chatterbox is my niece Miriam. Please excuse her. I'm Lori."

"Glad to meet you. Heston."

"Like that actor?"

Cowboy hat at a dapper angle, he lowered his head to give her a quick glance. Amusement flickered in his eyes along with the lights. Handsome wasn't a good enough adjective. She blinked fast. Miriam had quieted down, perhaps stunned speechless by the glorious decorations, and for a split second, Lori imagined herself and this...this Heston as the only people in the world.

Her spine skittered. What on *earth* was happening?

"Yup. None other. My dad's a classic movie freak." His chuckle came from deep down. "Wait 'til you meet my brothers. Fonda and Gable."

"What? No."

His straight face got her serious, until he burst out in another singing laugh. "Just kidding. Got a sister named Cagney, though. After Jimmy himself."

"And your mom went for all this?"

"She got to pick Widmark and Brando for my brothers. Honest. I'm not joking about that now. And like her namesake, my bossy sister in small but mighty." He snickered, and the sound turned white in the cold.

Miriam came alive now with confused, crinkled

cheeks, but Lori laughed hard and long. Oh, it felt so, so good. She didn't give in to laughter often enough. "I love it. I've heard of them, and I love it all."

The sleigh runners smoothed over the icy drive with peaceful, whooshing sounds, and Lori ached for the ride never to end.

Music and loud voices streamed from the big front porch ahead. She clenched her jaw. The TV cameras were going to be hard to take.

"Good to meet you, Heston. It...it looks like Hearts Crossing ranch is one happenin' place tonight." She forced out the words.

"Yep. The TV crew's been here all day. Filming some Christmas footage for *The Last Real Rancher*."

Something besides winter wind chilled her bones, but she shook it off. "Yeah, the invitation said so. My granddad loves the show," Lori mumbled.

Hearts Crossing's matriarch Elaine Martin had married widower Doyle Calhoun, star of a popular reality show featuring the day-to-day life of a Colorado rancher. The couple split times between their two historic spreads. Each had a horde of kids and grandkids.

"It'll broadcast Christmas Eve."

"It should be a good episode." Lori's fingers clenched inside her gloves. Oh, she longed for her grandparents' house in town. Even more, for her quiet private apartment in Texas. But her therapist decided trips to Colorado were helping put the past to rest.

She had yet to agree.

"Hey, you OK?" Heston looked at her again. Had she mumbled something she shouldn't? Miriam jostled against them both, but it was his nearness riling Lori's nerves

She forced a chuckle. "I...don't understand reality TV. Or putting videos online. I don't even get selfies. Or for that matter, anything that lives on the Internet forever."

How could she tell him more? That she feared somehow, some way, some day Kyle would see her face somewhere in cyberspace and find her again?

If that was even his real name. Shivers that had nothing to do with December wrestled underneath her warm clothes. The slip-sliding sounds of the sleigh tried to lull.

On top of everything, Heston's smile took her breath away. She tingled in the pit of her tummy.

"I think I get it. But *your* selfies preserved forever might not be a bad thing." His words were soft on the night air, and they surprised her. Now the tingle reached her toes. Heston might be flirting, but he wasn't out of line. Gentleness, thoughtfulness touched the gaze he sent her, and appreciation rustled through her veins.

"Thanks, but it's..." Not paranoia. No, it wasn't that. "I mean, it's an odd concept. To me. Putting your life on display on social media or on a show for millions of people to watch." She looked away. Even the corral fences were outlined with strings of lights. "I guess I'm...a private person."

Understatement. She shivered again and acted like it was the cold although the tingles he sparked heated her, too.

He tugged on the reins. "There's disclaimers everywhere. About visitors maybe getting filmed. You'll just have to be sneaky."

Sneaky. Kind of her everyday M.O. Lori's skin crawled. But maybe it was just the kick of a sudden

breeze.

"Oh, there's Ella. Let me out." Miriam's howl of excitement prevented Lori responding. The sleigh reached the porch where dozens of people milled about. Some people she recognized. Others, obviously part of the television crew. And she hated the new shudder.

Heston halted the horse, and Miriam all but flew out of the sleigh to find her little friend.

"Miriam...wait." Lori wanted to avoid any camera angle, but she had to follow her niece. Ella's dad Hooper Martin waved at her from the throng, letting her off the hook. At least for now.

"Hey, it'll be OK." Heston laid his hand on her arm, and then quickly withdrew it. As if *that* might be out of line. "The cameramen won't chase down any reluctant guest. And Miriam's in good hands."

For reasons that both frightened and calmed her, Lori wished his fingers were still on her forearm. "I know. Sorry. She's been champing at the bit to get here all day, and it'll be nice to have a little break. For both of us. My granddad just had surgery and had to send regrets. And of course my grandmother stayed behind. He's a lousy patient." She forced a laugh and pointed at the giggling group of little girls. "I mean, how could we not allow that?"

The horse proudly raised his head up and down at the "aw's" of those on the porch. He whickered, and Lori chuckled. The horse and sleigh were an impressive sight, and she waved to whoever might notice.

Heston chuckled, too, and then sobered. "I get what you mean about the cameras. You can hang outside with me if you want. Sleigh-chauffeur back

and forth from the parking pasture.”

“I think I’ll take you up on that, cowboy. It’s a good night for fresh air.” She’d have to go inside eventually, though, to greet her hosts. To put her grandparents’ gift under the tree. To face the gauntlet of publicity. But maybe, just maybe, God was willing her to try the company of a decent man her age and not give in to the panic.

Well, panic burred gain. She’d thought Kyle decent, too, else she’d never have let him pour her a glass of wine...

“Formally, I am Heston Calhoun.” He grabbed the rein with one hand, held out the other again.

Calhoun? Embarrassment flooded her. “Like in, uh, cowboy Doyle Calhoun, *The Last Real Rancher?*”

He laughed, deep in his chest. “None other than my father. I reckoned it was time for you to know my deep dark secret.”

Deep dark secret...

“Oh, Heston, I’m sorry.” Heat spilled down her spine. “Lori Lazaro. I sure didn’t mean to sound critical of your family’s show.”

He didn’t let go of her hand, slowed the horse with the other. “No worries. Talk about an odd concept. Dad asked all us kids, before he signed on for the show, whether we wanted to be filmed. We got to decide if, when, maybe. How much, how little. Me, I do as little as possible, but sometimes, I gotta give in.” He stretched out long, denim-clad legs as far as he could in the footwell. “Updates on social media. News bits for the show. You know. And he wants some family portraiture for Christmas.” His laugh rumbled in his chest. “Hard to say no. He’s a great guy.”

Lori relaxed. And Heston himself, a decent man

after all. A Martin stepson. She waggled the nerves back down her backbone. A private man who didn't like cameras, either. Maybe he'd laugh and loan her his Stetson when it was time to mount the porch steps; she could wear it and tuck it down far over her head. She squeezed his fingers through the layers of glove. Maybe he did understand.

For the first time in a long time, she felt comfortable at a man's side.

Well, almost comfortable. Talk about deep, dark secrets. Some secrets she'd never tell anyone. She wasn't over it yet, not by a long shot. Around her, the tiny white lights seemed to freeze into tears.

Goodness and good night! Here he was, Heston Calhoun with a beautiful woman at his side in the star-shine. Not to mention the viral glow of Hearts Crossing's holiday decorations. He grinned.

Yep, someone who shunned the limelight just like he did. A regular person, not a celebrity chaser or wannabe country star eager for some show time. Even in humble cowboy country, even opting out of most of his dad's PR and photo ops, the groupies always seemed to find him.

The last single Calhoun.

His breath turned silver with cold. Even out of the corner of his eye, he liked looking at Lori.

She nodded at the road. "Looks like you have more passengers to pick up at the parking pasture." Her brow furrowed for just a split second. "I should get out. You might need my seat."

"Nah, we'll squish." Heston smiled at her concern.

Saw more than concern about the passengers, though. Something had permanently crinkled the edges of her pretty eyes. Navy blue like the sky? Hard to tell in the starlight.

“OK then.” She settled back against the upholstery, leatherette against the elements. Her tan-and-red plaid coat shrugged around her, big red scarf swathed her neck. Enough of her long, dark brown hair wisped down her shoulders to make his fingers want to run through it.

“That’s good then, you not having to participate in your father’s show?”

He deftly got the sleigh turned around. “Well, I can’t say I *never* do.” He shrugged. “Dad can be mighty persuasive. Part of the show’s appeal is, well, family values. He likes us all to appear once in a while.”

“Like tonight?”

“Yep. But I gotta admit”—Heston tossed a glance into her big bright eyes and felt something down to the toes of his boots—“he’s a down-home family man, but he likes being a TV star. He’s got over-the-top confidence and likes everybody he meets from the get-go.”

“So how did it all start?” she murmured.

He hoped she was truly interested. Not just being polite. She definitely wasn’t a fan of the show, or else she’d know.

Beneath them, the sleigh runners slipped and slid and sang a wavy tune all their own. And he wanted the night never to end.

Heston waved to a batch of new arrivals still fifty yards away. “Somebody at church pitched him to CabinFever Cable Channel. Heard about their idea for a ‘reality’ show about real-life ranching. But I think,

with the name of our spread, Dad didn't dare say no. The High Noon ranch."

"High Noon Ranch? Even I've seen that classic movie." Lori's burst of laughter was sweet. "Are Heston and Cagney and the others the reason for the name?"

"Nooooo. It started long ago" —Heston tossed her a grin— "when our ancestors homesteaded outside the small town of Sunset Hills. There's a natural rock formation on a cliff side that works like a sundial. And it fits an area named for sunset. The area got its name in the 1880's."

"Incredible."

"Yep. But Dad is kind of unique in ranching society. It's a good fit." His deep laugh must have sounded to the group waiting a ride, for they all waved and called out hellos.

"Why is he unique? Well, other than High Noon. Isn't ranching, well, just ranching?" Lori's nose scrunched. It had reddened with cold but was adorable anyway. "Cows, hay. Fall markets?"

He grinned at her. "Not from here, are you?"

"No. San Antonio. I'm visiting my grandparents for the holidays."

"Well, you got a lot of it right. Throw in mud. Blizzard. Drought. Spring roundup. The occasional enteric infection. But Dad, well...he's unique." Heston peered at her from beneath his brim.

His breath hitched, and he felt like junior high. Her smile so weakened his knees he was glad he was sitting in the sleigh. "He's one of just a handful of ranchers who are certified to perform C-sections on struggling cows." Heston cleared his throat to calm down. His voice wasn't actually shaking, was it?

"That's good airtime. So is his helicopter. He uses it to help herd cattle where horses can't get to. And of course, sometimes Search and Rescue calls on him for transport."

"I am impressed. A man of many talents. I think he has a new fan. Me." Lori's gentle laugh breathed over him. "I better start watching the show. Even though..." Her voice changed. "You won't be on it."

Was she actually disappointed? His heart took a funny tumble.

In the sleigh's lantern light, her cheeks turned a shadowy pink, and then and there, he decided to take everything as a compliment. Maybe it was weird, though, talking about his father instead of her. Or even himself. But he plunged on. Her hand was so close to his knee...

"Aw, you won't miss me. Dad's hard to live up to. Last fall, he and the helo rescued a horse that had fallen into a crevice. Film crew happened to catch everything. And a few holidays ago, he transported Mountain Cove's pastor in a medical emergency."

"He does sound pretty unique."

"Well, just hold your horses." Heston hoped she didn't mind his lame pun. "You can meet him in a bit."

Did she tense?

They'd reached the new crop of guests, and as he'd done with Lori, he helped the ladies in the sleigh. None of them caused his fingers to zing, though.

Conversation switched to a rousing version of *Winter Wonderland*. Everything seemed all right in Heston Calhoun's little corner of the world.

At the drop-off at the front porch, his stepbrother Pike Martin helped him unload. "Time to switch, Hess. Go inside and warm up." Pike noticed Lori and took